

GREEN ISSUES

· COMMUNICATIONS ·



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Barker Review of Land Use Planning

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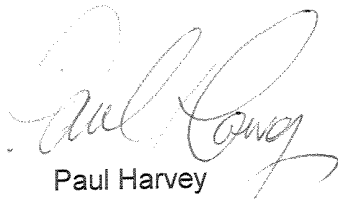
18th September 2006

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find enclosed the formal response to the Barker Review: Interim Report on Land Use Planning from Green Issues Communications. We have emailed a version to the Review Team earlier today and please receive this written version as our formal submission to the consultation exercise that finishes on the 19th September.

We recognise that this report is critical to the success of the future planning system. If you have any queries regarding our consultation submission, please contact me on 0118 902 8944 or 07894 095852. My email is paulh@greenissues.com.

Yours sincerely



Paul Harvey
Account Manager



Barker Review of Land Use Planning

1. Current Understanding

The Chancellor and the Deputy Prime Minister have invited Kate Barker, a member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee, to conduct an independent review of land use planning in England:

"It is vital that the planning system supports sustainable development; which means having proper safeguards for environmental and social considerations. But it also means making sure the planning system is flexible and able to support competition and economic growth across the country."

"We believe the planning system could be improved to support jobs and investment within sustainable communities more effectively. That is why we have asked Kate Barker to look at how the planning system can improve and respond to the modern economic challenges we face."

Statement by Yvette Cooper, Minister for Housing and Planning

"The goal of all aspects of planning is to create successful places where people want to work, shop, live or visit, where businesses flourish and where the natural environment is respected and enhanced"

Kate Barker, Forward to the Interim Report

2. Green Issues' Response

The Interim Report produced by Kate Barker is both comprehensive and provocative. It not only analyses the situation facing the planning system, but clearly identifies the most crucial of issues facing central government and local government.



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As with so much of the recent drive to improve the planning system, any conclusions that can be drawn from the Interim Report will be heavily influenced by this very consultation and thus the final paper will be eagerly awaited. No one should underestimate the challenges presented by this report or the Barker Review of the Planning System in general. The robustness of the reports eventual final recommendations is a critical issue.

If we are to truly see a transformed landscape in planning that harnesses the strengths of local government accountability and democracy, central government resources and national policy principles and regional strategic analysis, then there is need for radical reform. This interim report does not go far enough in pushing that message of the need for reform. That is not to say that the final report will not take on board a drive for a Planning Act that truly opens up the system of planning to great flexibility, adaptability and deliverability. Such an act can not be dominated by a debate solely about housing numbers as there are too many critical elements to such an act that have as much importance to the future of our communities as housing numbers.

“The planning system has a profound impact on our quality of life.”

Kate Barker, Interim Report

- 1) Economic Objectives: There should be serious concern in Central Government that Regional Spatial Strategies, designed by elected members who have the vagaries of party politics to contend with, fail to grasp the gravity of economic issues in the regions. In the South East for example there is a growing tension between the Regional Economic Strategy and the South East Regional Assembly's draft South East Plan. Time and again leading figures, such as the CBI, point out the contradictions between these two major policy documents.

The evidence-based approach has been supplanted by political considerations that do not reflect the needs of local communities. SEEDA's drive for diamonds of growth in



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the south east contradicts the SEERA position of limited growth. These contradictions are fundamental weaknesses of the current system.

The Barker Review needs to tackle these critical areas head on. Where evidence is sidelined by political actions that are not in the interests of economic objectives, the system must enable that evidence to be aired and considered even if finally rejected. While a balance between objectives must be an aim of any system, the overall importance of economic growth, stability and prosperity needs to be at the heart of the planning system. At this time they are not and this issue is one that the Barker Review must provide clear answers on. Not just from a structural point of view in who has responsibility for what, with what powers and accountable to whom, but also in principle point of view, how can the system enable local authorities to drive change? Much as the creation of new towns and the development corporations of their day in the 1960s and 1970s delivered radical change, we need a similar radicalism in the modern system.

- 2) Social Objectives: The planning system, aside from its responsibility through affordable housing targets and especially since the demise of local authority social housing grant, lacks the ability to influence the delivery of social objectives. By this, we might mean community facilities or social housing. We might reflect on regional spatial strategies that do not account for demographic trends in areas of most need when apportioning housing numbers or seeking to influence the delivery of infrastructure investment in areas of most need. There is a real need for better linkages between ambitious government programs of regeneration, analysis and understanding of regional needs at that strategic level and the local needs of areas that have pronounced social issues and are identified as being priorities not just by central government but by local government also. The need for 'joined up thinking' is most apparent when considering social need and its current absence from the system is most starkly seen as a current failing.



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The difference between a Development Control Committee at local level deciding in one instance a site for four units and in the very next item on the meetings agenda a site for 400 is foolish if one were serious about strategic planning and the delivery of a coordinated 'joined up' system of planning that could meet social objectives.

- 3) Environmental Objectives: The incentives within the planning system to promote environmental land use and development are poor. They do not foster a sense of progress, rather one of haphazard adherence to guidelines from forward thinking developers. Developers need to know the parameters of sustainable development not simply from the view of having a series of standards to potentially meet in an ad-hoc fashion, perhaps on a site by site basis, but clear and realistic targets that are reflected in Local Plans and Local Development Frameworks. Clear national leadership through identifiable and enforceable standards would help generate a system that did not groan when eco-homes' standards are suggested by local authorities on particular schemes. We should see the delivery of environmentally sustainable projects as the standard all developers must achieve. If through better communication and consultation the development of a system that met high standards on environmental issues was realised, the debate could be moved away from one of 'if' we deliver environmentally friendly projects. The preference could be a system where local authorities seek coordinated approaches with developers to deliver on local environmental standards that when considered at national level, reflected a more progressive approach to tackling key environmental issues. A 'top down' principled approach may be supported by local interpretation through Local Plans and LDFs that seek strategically to address environmental objectives.

The Barker analysis of sites and the distribution of them across the country is important in that it highlights the need for a national spatial strategy. While regional spatial strategies have forced local areas to consider the strategic nature of key issues, such as the objectives highlighted above, there is a need for a strategy that can cope with national migration from region to region, essential inter-regional issues, for example London's



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relationship with the South East and East of England and the need for a coordinated approach to national infrastructure issues. There is a need for a clear commitment at national level to national strategic planning that can better inform the regional and local level.

The speed and effectiveness of the planning system are important issues and much progress has been made in recent years on effecting positive change in the system. We have found that the system of pre-application consultation is one of the most valuable reforms. The drive to formalise this should be welcomed as it will ensure that the standard of communication with communities and stakeholders is high. A critical point remains, however, about the standard of decision making. Some Local authority committees can appear parochial when making their decisions. There is a need for the system to place emphasis on professionalism in decision-making amongst members such that they always act in a responsible fashion and are protected where possible from the political pressures of popular campaigns either pro or anti development. The statement in the report that the planning system can be made more responsive to the needs of sustainable economic development can be extended to argue that the system can be made more responsive to the needs of sustainable development.

A series of essential questions need to be asked about the planning system and development, land use and strategic planning and these include:

- What the costs are and who bears them, not just of changing the system but of the current failures of the existing system?
- What the benefits are and who enjoys them, how we balance community benefit with commercial profit?
- How those costs and benefits can best be measured?
- Who has the responsibility for decision-making and can local and regional differences be resolved in a way that preserves the integrity of local accountability and identified need?



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These questions reflect upon the view that the system needs to be reformed and that reform should take the form of reinforcing local government with local accountability, but also greater responsibility so that decisions, when made, reflect local needs not simply parochial local politics of 'who shouts the loudest gets listened to' by decision-makers.

This Interim Report highlights four very important influences on future policy that cannot be underestimated. The challenge is can the Barker Review deliver real proposals for change that will shift the culture of the system in tackling these important areas?

- Globalisation and Technological Change: We cannot escape our world reality. A global market exists that places essential pressures on the value and use of land. As an island nation, we must reflect the needs of our community and balance the economic interests of our society against the pressures for growth and development. We need both, but we must be able to sustain both.
- Climate Change and Environmental Limits: How we deliver development over the next 20 years will define our relationship with the environment in a way that has previously been incidental, we really do shape the face of the planet with our developments. It is now critical for our quality of life that we address these issues in a frank and honest way that divorces politics from the planning system and seeks to enhance the evidence based approach.
- Demographic change: Not only are we an ageing population, but we are living in more diverse family units with ever-changing needs. Our shifts in population across the country is matched by movement within Europe and from beyond and will have a huge impact on a planning system that has decision-makers in positions of authority that have no relationship with or are not close to being representative of our society.
- Increased prosperity: While our economy continues to be successful, the pressure for growth will inevitably place pressure on a planning system that must deliver a balance between need, prosperity and competing interests. Increased prosperity will create as many opportunities for increased flexibility in the planning system as the economy



transforms away from heavy industries towards a more significantly knowledge-based post-industrial economy and the need for the planning system to cope with division between communities with real needs and those which are more prosperous. The 'haves and have nots' in our society are reinforced by a planning system that does not tackle the inherent problems of first time buyers or older people seeking the opportunity to downsize.

3. Consultation

We are pleased that the report acknowledges the importance of consultation to the planning process.

Enhanced methods of consultation, which are reinforced by the success of pre-application consultation that has been growing, can necessarily go hand-in-hand with a far more efficient planning system. Whilst consultation is essential to a planning system that is democratically rooted, it is extremely difficult to do it properly and quickly. The issues seem to be: (a) to get the processes as streamlined as they reasonably can be and then (b) to decide how much delay we are prepared to trade off for full consultation.

Experience suggests that the public finds it much more difficult and less rewarding to engage in consultation at the higher and strategic levels of planning. The responses to regional level consultations are insignificant when the overall population is considered, but responses to local plans in boroughs and districts can often be the most contentious and the greatest volume of response a council gets in consultation all year. How do we craft the system to harness the views of local people without those views, which in the main are ill-informed creating a backlash that sees the system grind to a NIMBY or BANANA halt?

Consultation will not be an exercise in consensus building. The role of planning is to adjudicate between irreconcilable opposing views rather than broker consensus. That fact is not a positive one for a system that has such a fundamental impact on the quality of life of the majority. The loudest voices are often the smallest number of those affected.



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How can a system be crafted that ensures:

- The need for a more representative cross-section of public opinion to be reflected: At present, those age groups whose future housing and employment needs we are planning for are under-represented in the responses to planning consultations. Responses tend to be dominated by those who are already comfortably housed and employed or retired. Also, the business community – for a mixture of reasons – is not an effective partner in planning processes. New means of consultation need to be developed;
- The need for ongoing dialogue: Rather than having infrequent, set-piece consultations, we should be looking for more of an ongoing dialogue with our communities, building sustainable channels of communication and trying to ensure that public opinion is informed by all the facts. This alone could help the efficiency of consultation. The need for consultation should not be restricted to the planning application process. Developers and local authorities should be actively forced through the formalisation of a consultation process to consider communication with the community as an ongoing process.
- Tackling vested interests and NIMBYs: The principle of development has historically not always been unpopular with the public and we need to understand and address the factors that have led to its current unpopularity. Probably the greatest of these has been the past failure of essential infrastructure and services to keep up with growth. Much work is needed to ensure that this will not happen in future and, no less important, to convince the public that this will not happen. The link between the levels of government and the agencies involved has become so convoluted it has undermined the sense of purpose and created a democratic deficit. The need for clear lines of accountability and responsibility that enable local areas to tackle their own issues within a system of national principles is a debate that should be encouraged



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alongside this review. This review cannot be divorced from the Local Government Review being undertaken by DCLG and the Lyons Finance Review.

- Trust in the process: There is a need for a renewal in the relationship between local government and the residents the system supposedly represents. Consider that a greater empowered system of local government would increase not only the responsibility placed on democratically elected representatives but also reinvigorate the accountability felt by the local electorate. Stronger local government with more power to shape local areas through a system that still promotes national principles, but enhances local decision taking could bring about realignment within the system. We should not be afraid of localism that creates diversity if that is grounded in national principles, a 'one size fits all' system cannot deliver the kind of radical change we require to meet the needs we have already outlined in this response. Local politicians would have to accept more responsibility for their decisions and their decisions would have far greater impact. This balance between an emboldened local government linked to greater accountability would reinforce the value of effective and substantive consultation.

4. Conclusion

This document reflects Green Issues Communications' views and is based upon our considerable experience working within the planning system. We hope that the issues raised here might be considered as part of the final report.

